DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 817 JC 990 120

AUTHOR	Burgraff, Donna L.
TITLE	Providing Leadership in Rural America: A Model for Community Colleges.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	14p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; Community Colleges; Community Development; *Geographic Isolation; *Leadership Training; *Partnerships in Education; Rural Areas; *Rural Education; School Business Relationship; School Community Relationship; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

This article describes the formation of an educational partnership developed in a rural, Appalachian, coal-mining community. Williamson Main Street, Inc., a downtown revitalization program, and Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College (Southern) combined their efforts to create the Tug Valley Economic Development Institute (TVEDI). The partnership addressed the needs of area residents who lacked access to opportunities because of their remote location. TEVDI provided a series of training, workshops, and seminars designed to give business, community, and education leaders a leadership development program. Its immediate goals included: (1) identifying potential community leaders; (2) providing area leaders with leadership training; (3) determining the community's continuing needs, strengths, and opportunities; and (4) exploring solutions to problems and challenges of the area. These goals were met through community focus groups, including a session with local high school students; interactive cohort leadership training seminars; and employer-specific training geared toward downtown merchants. Obstacles encountered included advertising the program, seminar location and catering, and lack of participation by citizens in positions of power. Among TEVDI's benefits were a heightened awareness of the community, created by the community analysis; increased knowledge of the region for its two partners; and data gathered from focus groups. (EMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 427 817

Providing Leadership in Rural America: A Model for Community Colleges

Dr. Donna L. Burgraff
Director
Southern Mountain Center
Marshall University
P.O. Box 2900
Mount Gay, WV 25637
304/792-7098 ext. 303

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. Burgraff
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

TC 990 12D

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Providing Leadership in Rural America: A Model for Community Colleges

This article describes how one rural community formed a business/education/community partnership. This partnership concentrated on providing leadership training for area residents. The process used in developing the partnership is outlined. Lessons learned are highlighted, and the benefits of the partnership are described.

Providing Leadership in Rural America: A Model for Community Colleges

Rural America is alive and well in the United States, and suddenly, it seems, being "rediscovered" by the rest of the country. The media is discussing issues that are facing rural Americans. Major foundations such as Kellogg and Ford are developing rural initiatives. With such attention being given to rural areas, the question of who can and will provide leadership there is of paramount importance. Many are looking to rural community colleges, and one rural community college has begun to explore its leadership potential.

Few places in the United States are as remote as the coalfields of Southern West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky. Nestled within the Appalachian Mountains, this region has been geographically isolated for decades. The people who live in this region do so by choice, for there is no real reason to live there otherwise. Living conditions are often substandard; land is scarce, and jobs are scarcer. Yet, many people do choose to live in the region, and their plight is one which cannot be ignored.

In trying to address the economic development needs of this region, a

project was developed to try and provide area residents with opportunities to which they normally would not have access. Williamson Main Street, Inc., a downtown revitalization program, and Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College (Southern), the local community college, formed a business/education/community partnership to address these needs. It was called the Tug Valley Economic Development Institute.

The Tug Valley Economic Development Institute's (TVEDI) primary purpose was to provide a series of trainings, workshops, and seminars designed to provide business, community, and education leaders with a leadership development program. The goals of the institute included: to identify potential community leaders; to provide area leaders with leadership training; to determine the community's continuing needs, strengths, and opportunities; and to explore solutions to the problems and challenges of the area. These goals would be met through three different kinds of activities: focus groups, cohort leadership training, and employer-specific training.

Forming the Tug Valley Economic Development Institute was an excellent opportunity to combine two strong entities into a solid partnership.

Williamson Main Street had a board of directors comprised mostly of business men and women. As such, they had little to no knowledge about delivery of training information. Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College was an educational institution with little to no involvement in the activities of the business community. By forming this partnership, these two entities combined their assets to create a dynamic opportunity for the area.

Realizing that the answers to the region's plight were with its people, TVEDI began by asking residents to analyze the area in a week-long series of focus groups. The focus groups were targeted at specific groups of people: downtown merchants, college employees, public school employees, high school students, community agencies, and larger employers. The institute invited people to a specific group and hired an outside facilitator to conduct the sessions. The basic premise behind the focus groups was to explore the assets of the region.

Each group began by discussing the needs of the region, which was fairly easy to do. The difficult part came when discussing the assets. The people in the groups were often not accustomed to examining positive aspects, and more

than once the facilitator had to stop the process and remind the group what the task was. At the conclusion of the focus groups, TVEDI developed a report and shared it with the local media, state leaders, and all focus group participants.

Some common threads ran through the data. In every single focus group either the first or second asset cited was the people of the region. This region of the country has had a wealth in human resources, yet there have been few efforts to provide leadership training and improvement opportunities to those with potential for development. Here was an opportunity where the institute could provide some leadership.

Of particular interest during this process was the session with high school students. The institute directors felt that if groups were gathering to discuss the future of the area, then those who were going to spend most of their time living in it should be consulted. Often with the young people their answers were more direct and to the point, and even more critical than other groups yet they were more open to giving the process a try. While their responses generally corresponded to the other groups' responses, the need to address

these issues with the young people was readily apparent.

The second phase of the partnership was to offer a cohort leadership training to interested residents. Approximately twenty-five people were asked to commit one day a month over four months to attend a leadership seminar. Each seminar was conducted by a different facilitator, again from outside the community. The seminars' topics were: *Leadership, Successful Collaborations: One Community's Model, Effective Communication,* and *Strategic Planning.*

The seminars were as interactive as possible. Evaluations were completed at the end of each session so that the directors could modify the next month's session if needed. To enhance the content, the seminars were held at various historical locations in the downtown area.

The idea was to remind the participants that this was an innovative program. It would not be a dull, boring lecture but, instead, a dynamic, interactive session. The ultimate goal was to provide skills, which could immediately be adapted in the workplace.

During the sessions, it became evident that a more detailed analysis was needed before moving onto the final activity–employer- specific training. The

institute, again, hired an outside facilitator to spend a week analyzing the area. This time downtown merchants were the specific target group. The analyst spent a week talking individually to downtown merchants to gather data on needs, assets, and particularly on training opportunities. Based on the findings from this report, TVEDI began offering trainings geared toward specific groups and/or employers.

As with any program, there were a few problems encountered along the way. Because this was a new concept, achieving "buy in," was the first obstacle to overcome. The local paper and radio station would offer news stories to assist in informing the public about what was being developed. Since this was a small, rural area, however; most information was disseminated through direct communication.

Location of the seminars produced another obstacle. Choosing historic locations in town to host the leadership seminars did enhance the content. Unfortunately, this was a community without an adequate catering service. Providing breakfast and lunch to participants was difficult, at best. On the positive side, it did give a couple of local businesses an opportunity to provide a

new service.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle, which really was not overcome, was lack of participation by citizens in positions of power. While those who attended the seminars found them useful, most would be able to impact only their immediate workplace. Community-wide implementation of learned skills would be difficult because the people with positional power did not attend the seminars. This must be corrected in the next cohort leadership group.

There were many benefits to the Tug Valley Economic Development Institute. First, and probably foremost, was the heightened awareness created by the community analysis. While "outsiders" facilitated this analysis local citizens produced the actual content. Those who participated began viewing their community in a different light and gained a renewed commitment that they could and should contribute to the welfare of the region.

The two partners also benefited. Williamson Main Street began offering specific services to its constituents through the trainings. While Main Street had always conducted programs, those programs had been concentrated on attracting customers to downtown. This was the first time that Main Street

offered a specific service to the area's employers.

Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College also benefited from the partnership. The college had been examining recent trends that suggested that community colleges, particularly in rural areas, needed to begin economic development activities in order to have a viable future. With no real expertise in this area and with a resistant faculty, the college had been slow to begin economic development endeavors. This partnership allowed the college to begin this process.

A final benefit was the data itself. The data has been available for the public and has been used to facilitate discussions. It has also been used in grant applications to develop further trainings for the area.

Because the Southern and the Main Street Program committed personnel to this partnership, the cost to run the program was greatly reduced. Dr. Donna L. Burgraff, representing the community college, and DeAnna Darby, Executive Director of Main Street, served as co-directors of the institute. The college also donated copying supplies, postage, and equipment usage. The facilities, where the seminars were held, were also donated. Thus, expenses

were limited to participant supplies, refreshments, travel, and consultant fees. The initial funding was provided by a small grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation with the goal of asking area employers to provide donations to sustain the institute.

The institute's work was recently rewarded by the state of West Virginia. The Tug Valley Economic Development Institute received the state's Best Business Assistance Award. It was cited for its contributions to leadership development in the Tug Valley area.

The Tug Valley Economic Development Institute was a successful project for many reasons. First, two institutions combined their individual strengths to form a stronger organization able to explore arenas where neither had been before. Perhaps what made it a larger success was that it was a "grassroots" effort. Consultants were hired to share their experiences and expertise, but they were not displayed as "saviors." TVEDI felt that "saving" the area could only be done by the people of the region. They had the answers; facilitators just showed them how to recognize that.

The Tug Valley Economic Development Institute is one rural

community's model for improving its region. It is an example of an effective collaboration between business and a community college. Through the institute's efforts, one rural, Appalachian, coal mining community is refocusing and moving forward.

Dr. Donna L. Burgraff is the Southern Mountain Center Director for Marshall University and is Co-Director of the Tug Valley Economic Development Institute. She is also a Kellogg National Fellow.

© 1999 All Rights Reserved, Dr. Donna L. Burgraff